That Man in That Box

Can we talk about gentrification in the context of colonialism and deprived lands? What does it mean to own the land? Rana Asali raises questions after visiting “That Man in That Box”, a performance piece by Palestinian artist Rabia Salfiti.

Critique / Rana Asali September 13, 2018

Palestinian performing artist Rabia Salfiti locked himself up, naked, inside a roofless box, where he stayed for six days in the hot month of July. During the performance piece, Salfiti didn’t leave the box, relying totally on what he got from the audience for clothes, food, and drink. The spectators were able to watch him through two large windows. Salfiti took a vow of silence and didn’t make a sound or utter a word during his stay.

Located in Wadi Salib, part of the exhibition "Pyramida Platform" (curator: Galia Bar Or), outside the Pyramida Center for Contemporary Art, the 8 square meters box had an open hole through which anyone could drop him anything they chose, and a computer was available to the audience to send the artist any message or video they wished. Salfiti was able to see the messages through a screen set up inside his box, but he couldn’t respond.

Rabia Salfiti, "That Man in That Box", 2018

Video of Rabia Salfiti, "That Man in That Box", 2018
ربيع سلفيتي، "ذاك الرجل في ذاك الصندوق"، 2018، بيراميدا – مركز للفنون المعاصرة

It’s tempting to see Salfiti as a fanatical devotee of some religion, a prisoner, a social media victim, or an ordinary man going through a “hero journey”.1 But mainly his work fits squarely within performance art’s peculiar explorations of the human condition.

The relationship between thought, speech (or non speech), and form in this performance is also characteristic of Salfiti’s work, where he uses performance and interventionist actions to challenge and transgress physical and mental boundaries, and highlight social and political conventions, conveying the poetic junction between the formless and the form (see, White Noise *[1]* (2014), The Pilgrimage *[2]* (2014), The Human Portrait *[3]* (2012)).

IMAG8922.jpg **[4]**



[5]Rabia Salfiti, That Man in That Box, 2018
Photographer: Orit Siman-Tov, courtesy of Pyramida Contemporary Art Center

צילום אורית סימן טוב (1).jpg **[6]**



[7]Rabia Salfiti, That Man in That Box, 2018
Photographer: Orit Siman-Tov, courtesy of Pyramida Contemporary Art Center

The Coyote in the Room

That Man in That Box, given the context and location, has the shock value of German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys's famous performance work, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). For three consecutive days, Beuys would spend eight hours living and communing with the coyote. While its patriotic title recalls the popular myth of the United States as a melting pot,2 Beuys saw in 1970s America a nation divided over its involvement in the Vietnam War, and, particularly, a country whose white population oppressed indigenous natives and minority populations3. Despite the coyote's representation as an aggressive predator, and, amazingly, as an intruder, by European white settlers and their descendents, who sought to eliminate it, to Beuys, and to the natives, the coyote was America's spirit animal.4

Similarly and amusingly, during the talk Salfiti gave in Kabareet5, he spoke of a gallery guard, accompanied by the police, who had approached the box and asked him to leave the box thinking that he was a trespassing homeless. Salfiti had taken a vow of silence during his whole stay, so he didn't react. Only when some members of the audience intervened and explained that he was the artist in this work that the guard backed out.

רביע סלפיתי אורית סימן טוב.jpg **[8]**



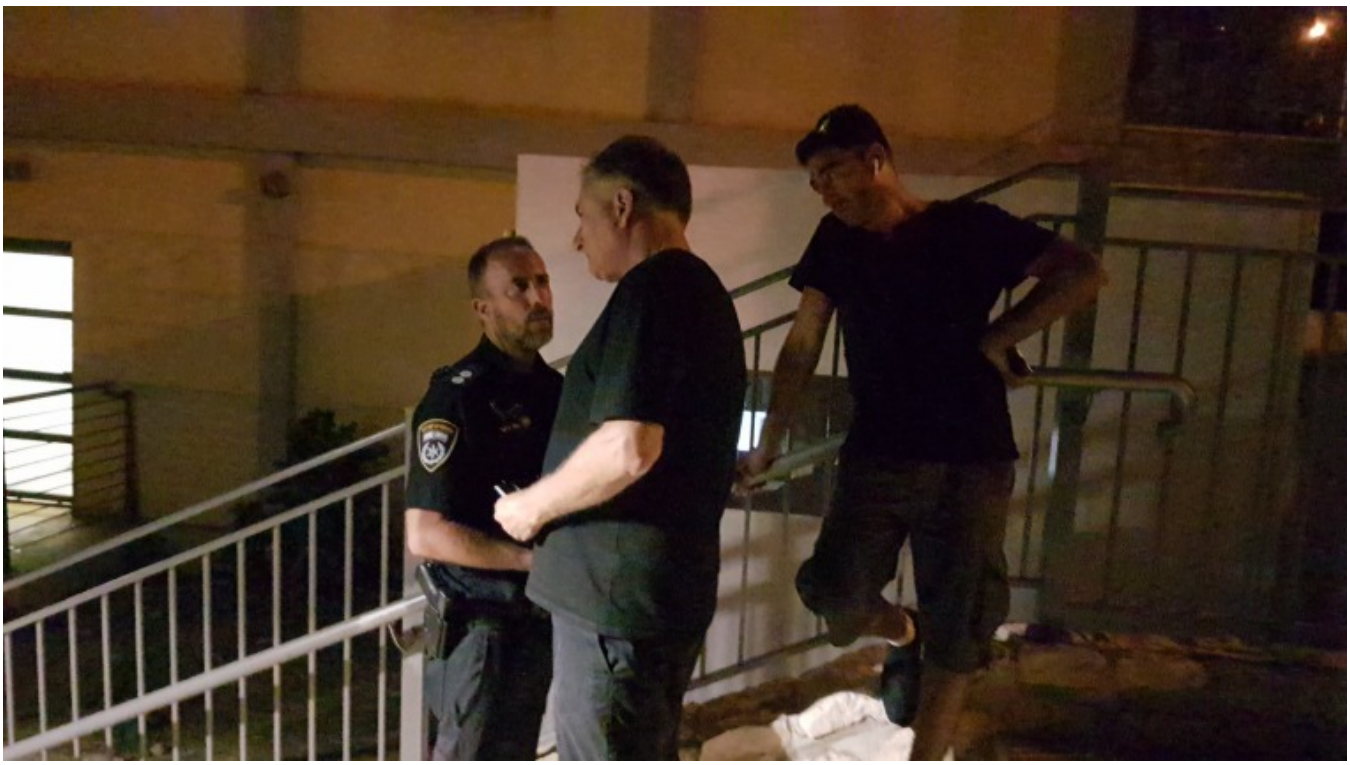
[9]Rabia Salfiti, That Man in That Box, 2018
Photographer: Orit Siman-Tov, courtesy of Pyramida Contemporary Art Center

20180719_204357.jpg **[10]**



[11]Rabia Salfiti, That Man in That Box, 2018
Photographer: Nadine Nashef

20180719_203738.jpg **[12]**



[13]Rabia Salfiti, That Man in That Box, 2018
Photographer: Nadine Nashef

That Box, This Place

Although Salfiti has no coyote to deal with inside the box (or has he?) one has to ask whether the location of the box has been accidental or why a roofless box has been chosen. The box is located outside the Pyramida building, in Wadi Salib, a Palestinian neighborhood of empty houses and amazing structures that stand as powerful witnesses of the horrors of the 1948 Palestinian Nakba. The buildings had belonged to Palestinian refugees and local displaced Palestinians, and were confiscated by Israeli Authorities under the Absentee Property Law after the Nakba. One former resident, now aged 93, is Abdullatif Kanafani[6], whose family lived at 15 al-Bourj Street, a prominent home overlooking the wadi (Arabic for valley). He was 22 years old when the family — his mother and father, his two brothers and their wives, and his sister — fled the shelling for safety in Acre, north of Haifa. From there, as shelling again closed in on them, the family fled to Lebanon and were never allowed to return. Their house was seized as “absentee property,” a fate shared by many of the 700,000 Palestinians who have been forced to abandon their homes and businesses during the Nakba.[7] Now the neighbourhood is being “renovated” by the municipality of Haifa, which is turning it into an art and culture hub, ignoring its history and depriving the Palestinian owners’ rights to their property, and by this erasing any Palestinian existence that had been there before.

During my visits to Salfiti’s box, I heard lots of art enthusiasts, the attendees of the gallery, who were standing near the box and looking at the demolition and construction work of Wadi Salib’s beautiful old houses, and saying out loud, romantically[8], “Pure gentrification”. These words disturbed me quite a lot. Can we talk about gentrification in the context of colonialism and deprived lands? Gentrification, a term coined by British sociologist Ruth Glass[9] to describe the influx of middle-class families into lower-income neighborhoods and displacing some residents in London in the 1960s. Gentrification is absolutely horrible and is driven by classism and capitalism, and in many cases racism as well, and certainly needs to be addressed and fought against, but it is not the case in Wadi Salib, and it is not the case in the context of colonialism.

In contemporary urban environments, dispossession often takes the form of gentrification, homelessness, and negligence. Yet in Wadi Salib none of these terms apply. Here we don’t have the luxury of using such terms, since we are still living under settler colonialism and the forced eviction of the natives, and land theft is an everyday reality. To address this, Salfiti has built the box and became the naked man outside an Israeli art gallery in the Palestinian Wadi Salib neighbourhood, among the houses of forcefully-evicted Palestinians during the israeli invasion of 1948.

It was clear to me that the performance reflected the way a colonial state dehumanized and erased the existence of the native people by giving the naked man the pretense of temporary food and shelter, which would ultimately be demolished and taken away. This work suggests, rather provocatively, an affinity between human beings and peoples who refuse to disappear and the collective blindness of those who are responsible for situations such as these.

What if the most salient mechanism of survival is the sheer refusal to go away? What does it mean to own the land? In a nation founded on violence against indigenous and native people, these questions invite us to examine the audience complicity in perpetuating the violence.

רביע סלפיתי צילום דניאל אבוקרט.jpg **[14]**



[15]Rabia Salfiti, That Man in That Box, 2018
Photographer: Daniel Abukarat, courtesy of Pyramida Contemporary Art Center

That Man, His Grin

"**Alice**: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

The Cheshire Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: I don't much care where.

The Cheshire Cat: Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.

Alice: ...So long as I get somewhere.

The Cheshire Cat: Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough."10

Salfiti, whose focuses in his art on the human experience and the art of the now, explores what he describes as the relationship between individuals and their environment, the form and the formless, and truth and falsehood.11 It is the meaning that the artist infuses into the work, and the meaning that we as the audience stand to gain from it, that holds the key to its status as art.

Using art to point out the failures of the legal system or the hypocrisy of humanitarian discourse, for Salfiti *That Man in That Box* is a journey not of discovery but of recovery, as he seeks to regain something stolen, lost, or forgotten. Looked at in one way, *That Man in That Box* gets to be like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat, dissolving away until nothing is left but a grin: a recovery for him and an invitation for the audience to experience, question, and decide whether they are amused or abused.

Rabia Salfiti's performance was part of Pyramida Platform [16] (curator: Galia Bar Or) and was on view between July 19 and 26, 2018, at Pyramida - Center for Contemporary Art, Haifa.

- 1. Joseph Campbell, The Hero Journey, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990
- 2. https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-joseph-beuys-locked-room-live-coyote [17]
- 3. Ibid.
- 4. Ibid.
- 5. Artist Talk, Rabia Salfiti at Kabareet Pub, July 26, 2018.
- 6. William Parry, Palestinian Homes Abandoned in Nakba Attest To History of Haifa's Wadi Salib Neighborhood, https://www.wrmea.org/016-january-february/palestinian-homes-abandoned-in-nakba-attest-to-history-of-haifas-wadi-salib-neighborhood.html [18]
- 7. Ibid.
- 8. The box is located in an open space where the construction work in Wadi Salib is only a glance away, 16 July, 2018.
- 9. https://lastrealindians.com/gentrification-is-not-the-new-colonialism/ [19]
- 10. Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland, 1865.
- 11. www.rabiasalfiti.com [20]

Source URL: https://tohumagazine.com/article/man-box

Links
[1] https://rabiasalfiti.com/performance-art/white-noise/
[2] https://rabiasalfiti.com/performance-art/untitled/

[3] https://rabiasalfiti.com/video-art-and-installations/the-human-portrait/
[4] https://tohumagazine.com/file/imag8922jpg
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IMAG8922.jpg
[6] https://tohumagazine.com/file/%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%9D-%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%9F-%D7%98%D7%95%D7%91-1jpg
[7] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%9D%20%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%AA%20%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%9F%20%D7%98%D7%95%D7%91%20%281%29.jpg
[8] https://tohumagazine.com/file/%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A2-%D7%A1%D7%9C%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%99-%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%9F-%D7%98%D7%95%D7%91jpg
[9] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A2%20%D7%A1%D7%9C%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%99%20%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%AA%20%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%9F%20%D7%98%D7%95%D7%91.jpg
[10] https://tohumagazine.com/file/20180719204357jpg
[11] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/20180719_204357.jpg
[12] https://tohumagazine.com/file/20180719203738jpg
[13] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/20180719_203738.jpg
[14] https://tohumagazine.com/file/%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A2-%D7%A1%D7%9C%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%99-%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%9D-%D7%93%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%90%D7%91%D7%95%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%98jpg
[15] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A2%20%D7%A1%D7%9C%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%99%20%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%9D%20%D7%93%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%90%D7%9C%20%D7%90%D7%91%D7%95%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%98.jpg
[16] http://pyramida-art.com/en/opening-event-at-pyramida-platform/#Pyramida_Platform_%E2%80%93_July_2018
[17] %20https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-joseph-beuys-locked-room-live-coyote
[18] https://www.wrmea.org/016-january-february/palestinian-homes-abandoned-in-nakba-attest-to-history-of-haifas-wadi-salib-neighborhood.html
[19] https://lastrealindians.com/gentrification-is-not-the-new-colonialism/
[20] http://www.rabiasalfiti.com